

Swiss roots with multi-cultural and multi-linguistic branches: the challenges of sharing and building on knowledge at Intercooperation

Jane Carter, Pascale Aubert, Arjumand Nizami, Alain Cuvelier, Julia Randimbisoa and Lorena Mancero

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of a Swiss international development organisation, Intercooperation, in promoting knowledge management. It notes that participatory learning is strongly embedded in organisational practice, and has led in the past decade into more pro-active knowledge management. This is examined through the lens of the 'multiple knowledge variables' of gender, seniority, specific belief systems, field-head office interactions, working function, language and organisational culture. A variety of impacts of KM are discussed, taking specific examples from Latin America, Madagascar, Pakistan, India and a specific cross-continent knowledge sharing exercise. Lessons learned overall include that IT systems for promoting organisational KM should be kept simple; KM processes are generally highly appreciated by the organisation's immediate clients (donors), and need to be planned systematically; and that KM can clearly work in support of Intercooperation's ultimate clients, the poor and marginalised. The recent development of a KM policy strengthened recognition of existing KM practices in the organisation, but also heightened awareness of the need to increase South-South knowledge sharing and learning.

Introduction

Intercooperation (henceforward IC) has a staff of well over 500 men and women, collectively having more than 30 different nationalities, who are scattered across Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The majority of these individuals are nationals of the country in which they work. Whilst the head office (HO) is based in Bern, Switzerland, IC has a decentralised structure, with regional offices (delegations) in six locations (Ecuador, Mali, Madagascar, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) and smaller offices elsewhere. It is on the basis of the skills and expertise that it can offer that the organisation gains mandates from donor agencies to implement projects and programmes, or to provide back-stopping services. The human resources of IC are thus its main asset. IC's main client is the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, (SDC), although a widening of our client base is slowly taking place, and is actively sought. It should be noted that SDC is an active proponent of KM (<http://snipurl.com/9mon9>). In an increasingly competitive market, IC sometimes competes and sometimes collaborates with other Swiss NGOs such as Helvetas, Swisscontact and Swissaid for mandates to implement development activities. The relatively small world of Swiss development NGOs is also increasingly challenged by non-Swiss development actors seeking to work with SDC. Against this setting, this paper considers how KM has developed

in IC, the introduction of an organisational KM strategy (policy), and the practical realities of KM implementation.

Organisational perspective

In Australian terminology, IC may be labelled a DINGO – a Donor Instigated NGO. The organisation was created 26 years ago as an off-shoot of SDC at a time when there was an increase in Swiss government funding for development, but a cap in the employment of civil servants. The solution – to create a separate organisation of specialists in certain domains – eventually became what we are today, a Swiss non-profit making foundation working in developing and transition countries, managing projects and providing support services (mandates) in natural resource management, the rural economy and local governance and civil society. Support services are indeed increasingly important in both number and financial volume. We are also increasingly active in international fora (particularly in forestry and climate change issues). From our origins and current activities, we are in essence an organisation that provides knowledge based on thematic specialisation and field experience.

Although KM was not always conceptualised as such within IC, the strong affinity between knowledge and development (Quaggiotto 2005) is evidenced in our working approaches, which emphasise participatory learning. IC has been both influenced by, and has contributed to, trends in development thinking over the years, and the participatory approaches that came into mainstream development thinking so strongly in the late 1980s and 1990s (eg. Chambers 1997) characterise organisational practice. Many different participatory learning methodologies have been used over the years, of which some of the most common are farmer field schools, participatory technology development (PTD), participatory beneficiary assessment, and the very widely used ZOPP (<http://snipurl.com/456wj>). All these have contributed to an organisational culture of sharing and respect for the knowledge of others – which is indeed enshrined in our organisational vision and principles (<http://www.intercooperation.ch/about/mission/>). The current conceptual basis for KM within IC can be illustrated by the following policy statement: “Intercooperation seeks to be a learning organisation, active in knowledge management as an integral part of our work in promoting socially inclusive, sustainable development...We believe in creating an organisational environment in which staff members respect the knowledge of others – in particular local, indigenous knowledge – and enjoy learning and sharing.”

A student who focused on KM in Swiss development organisations for his Masters thesis concluded that, “The sample organisations roughly follow two different philosophies for the promotion of systematic knowledge sharing...a holistic, organisation-wide approach with the scope of action involving numerous organisational areas and levels...[or] a more selective approach, focussing on specific enablers for internal knowledge sharing in certain areas. At a more concrete level however, the different approaches use very similar tools, methods and guiding principles.” (Hugelshofer, 2007). In this categorisation, Intercooperation falls into the latter group.

KM Objectives

Ramalingam (2005: 38) observed that, “Knowledge and learning strategies in development organizations need to be clearly and realistically positioned within the broader dynamics of organizational life...such that the idea of knowledge transfer to the South is increasingly replaced by learning with and from the South.” In fact, Intercooperation’s early KM initiatives had two clear strands. One was essentially in line with North to South transfer – although it should be stressed that it was never seen as a totally one-way exchange, but always recognised as a mutual learning process. This transfer entailed thematic specialists based in Bern, as well as expatriates based in country, providing their knowledge to different projects and partners (a rotation of international staff between the field and Bern helping to enhance such knowledge exchanges). Whilst thematic specialists continue to operate from Bern, and field-Bern rotations are still encouraged, expatriates based in the field have diminished in numbers over the years (from over 80 to some 20). They have been replaced by national specialists who have richer and deeper local knowledge, and who make up the majority of Intercooperation’s current human resources. The second strand in IC’s KM processes – of which there are now many and varied examples - is on South-based KM initiatives, often at country level, but also at regional level. In many ways, the biggest challenge now lies in furthering horizontal, South-South (cross-regional) KM processes. In a re-organisational process that is being brought in during 2009, greater decentralisation should contribute to such processes.

Formal attempts to coordinate KM within the organisation began some eight years ago. Perhaps inevitably, the first focus was on developing a knowledge database, with the objective of categorising and sharing existing knowledge. Enthusiasm for open-access software was high, and expensive “off the shelf” packages were rejected in favour of using free software that could be tailored to organisational needs. After careful consideration of existing (library-based) categorisation systems, it was also decided to draw up a practically-oriented, tailored categorisation system of the topics and competences in which we have knowledge – so that all staff, projects/support service contracts, and relevant documents could be thus labelled and linked. Staff members were asked to participate in a knowledge mapping exercise, and an extranet was established that contained staff and project details, plus documents uploaded voluntarily for sharing. This database focus corresponds very much to the first generation view of KM as described by various authors and summarised in Ferguson, Mchonbu and Cummings (2008:12). The process was far from simple, however, and had various flaws. As it was realised with some amusement (and frustration), the categorisation system had been strongly influenced by a few individuals (predominately foresters), despite efforts to share and achieve wide participation. The categorisations had to be amended accordingly (which took time and effort as the database was by then partially constructed). More fundamentally problematic, the extranet was slow and user-unfriendly, and (particularly in the early 2000s, when many regional and field offices still had slow internet connections) very difficult for field-based staff to access.

KM was given added organisational consideration in 2002, when a member of staff who was studying for an MBA took it as her thesis subject (see also the section on organisational culture). Amongst her key findings were that, “Although knowledge management activities do take place at IC, they appear uncoordinated and unsystematic, showing significant differences between individual projects in the field” (Schmidt, 2002). Written from a business school perspective, the thesis was in many ways an example of second generation KM – “Knowledge creation to satisfy organisational needs; organisational learning and value creation” (Lazlo and Lazlo 2003, quoted in Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings 2008:12).

Whilst the recommendations of Schmidt went wider than IT solutions, the immediate focus of KM coordination at HO remained on achieving a satisfactory IT system. Thus a successor to the extranet was planned, elaborated and finally brought into operation in late 2006. Called Memex, it uses Plone software and comprises three interlinked databases, storing information on members, projects/mandates, and documents (including all the library documents in HO). It is a member-based system, with different access levels; only the outer skin is accessible to the general public, whilst staff members have full access and individuals associated with IC have near-full access (<http://memex.intercooperation.net/>). To date Memex has largely operated on a self-responsibility basis; staff members are expected to fill in the details in their profiles, the projects/mandates under their responsibility, and add to the database documents of interest to others.

Over 2006-2007, a KM Policy was elaborated (in the organisational context, “policy” may be read as “strategy”). This policy was drafted by a (then newly appointed) Knowledge Coordinator in a participatory process, being circulated amongst staff for comment – with interested members of HO, as well as the six delegations, being specifically asked for feedback. A key aim was for the document to embrace and recognise the diversity of existing KM initiatives, as well as providing organisational support for their further development. At around the same time, the Coordinator raised the matter of devising a KM policy in a Swiss development “think table” (see box), for a peer assist session. This peer assist brought a number of observations, of which perhaps the most interesting suggestion (given partially jokingly) was to draw out the consultation process as long as possible. The reason given was that as long as people are being asked to give opinions and are encouraged to think about KM, they have it in mind. Once a policy is finalised, they may stop thinking so much about it.

The Swiss development “Think Table”

The think table was established in 2004, following the successful “Dare to Share” KM event organised by SDC (<http://www.daretoshare.ch/>). It comprises a group of KM professionals based in Switzerland who are working in development and cooperation – or linked in some way to this field. Several members are in fact from the private sector (notably the large re-insurance firm, SwissRe) – which adds specific richness to discussions. The group meets for face-to-face discussions roughly bi-annually, responsibility for organising the meetings being rotated. Usually attendance is 15-20 persons out of a total membership of roughly 40.

It was indeed true that the draft policy provoked thought and discussion at regional (delegation) level – with varying responses. In the Andes and Bangladesh delegations, it was felt that the overall policy would do well to recognise and endorse KM practices already implemented in the region (see box on Bangladesh). In the Sahel delegation, a new delegation website was being developed, so feedback centred on web-based sharing opportunities (or the difficulty of them). In the Madagascar delegation, a new post was created to support KM, and responsibilities also allocated for specific thematic coordination. In Pakistan, the discussion of the KM policy was seen strongly in the context of capturing existing knowledge from projects that were closing or being phased into a new programme; a student was engaged to conduct his practical internship to this end (Schneider, 2008). In India, the KM policy was also discussed in the context of streamlining existing projects, the local focus being on bringing a new knowledge centre into being.

Building on evidence based learning – “capitalisation of experiences”

“Capitalisation of experience” (a French-derived term frequently used in Swiss development circles) is a widely used approach within IC. In Bangladesh, it was instigated at the overall programme level in 2002, with the objective of sharing operational experiences. In the process, the project and partner staff became more deeply aware of negative and positive impacts of their own interventions at the community level. This encouraged them to internalise relevant development approaches and attitudes they had to adopt in their work, sometimes more effectively than training and coaching them. It took time to develop capacities in evidence-based learning, but the process was recognised as a major component in the activities of the projects and the Delegation - promoting common vision, values and approaches, as well as strengthening the competences of the teams, and that of the organisation.

One aspect in the policy development process on which many people commented was why effective knowledge management may not take place. It was agreed that reasons include distance, cultural differences and language; and the time-consuming nature of regular activities coupled with the human tendency to focus on immediate tasks. Amongst some individuals, there is also a reticence to share knowledge. This may be due to shyness; not realising the value of one’s knowledge to someone else; unwillingness to speak about or admit mistakes; inter-personal frictions; a (mistaken) perception that one can gain influence and power by keeping knowledge to oneself, etc.

The practicalities of KM are discussed further below, but the accepted objective of knowledge management within IC is “to pool the collective knowledge of our organisation in a manner that we constantly learn, have a sense of belonging and contributing to a wider team, and are more creative and efficient in promoting socially inclusive, sustainable development - thus having a positive impact on the lives of the poor and otherwise disadvantaged.” (Intercooperation, 2007a). In this sense, we effectively reached a third

generation KM view, a “people-centric, practice-based approach” (Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings 2008:12).

The approach

ICs’s KM policy is largely concerned with the practicalities of supporting KM. Nevertheless a few key KM concepts are integral to understanding. One is the recognition of separate but interlinked knowledge processes – so that tasks and responsibilities are discussed according to the creation, sharing, storing and use of knowledge. Another is the importance of giving attention to different types of knowledge – explicit, tacit and implicit (see Ramalingam, 2005: 4). Tacit knowledge is defined in the policy as that which is unconscious and intuitive – it is knowledge that we have but don’t necessarily realise someone else does not have (or that it might be interesting to them). Implicit knowledge is defined in the policy as, “similar to tacit knowledge in that it is often unspoken, but it refers to social and cultural norms. It is knowledge of shared beliefs, values and expectations” (Intercooperation, 2007a). Some would argue that distinguishing between tacit and implicit knowledge adds unnecessary complexity; however, an appreciation of the difference can be important in a development context (see section on specific belief systems).

Given that the term “learning organisation” is used so widely (and often by members of IC staff), the policy also has a section in annex setting out what striving to become a learning organisation means in IC’s context – broadly based on Senge (1990). Another annex indicates various tools supportive to KM – including ones such as Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, Peer Assists and Story Telling.

A learning organisation

Peter Senge (1990) identifies five key “disciplines” in striving to be a learning organisation:

Promoting systems thinking - to function effectively, all parts of the organisation need to work together, not in isolation

Encouraging personal proficiency - deliberately encouraging the personal development of each staff member

Challenging mental models – maintaining an open attitude in professional interactions, and striving to understand, appreciate and learn from the point of view of others

Building a shared vision - even in mundane work activities, seeking coherence with the organisational vision

Supporting team learning - listening to others and building ideas together, in a synergistic manner.

Integrating multiple perspectives

The staff of IC is made up of men and women with very different educational, social and cultural backgrounds, without one truly shared language. Furthermore, we work closely in the field with a variety of partners (local community based organisations, national NGOs, international NGOs, government departments, research organisations, etc), whose backgrounds are different again. How does the organisation deliberately seek to integrate multiple perspectives in its work? There are numerous ways, some practised widely throughout the organisation, and others more tailored to local contexts. A comprehensive discussion in a short paper is not possible; rather, various examples are given below.

Gender

Separate from (but fully compatible with) the KM Policy, IC has a specific Gender Policy (as well as a Human Resources Policy). Possibly as with the KM Policy, the main value of the Gender Policy lay in the opportunity for discussions in its elaboration, although it serves as a reference document in case of need (guiding matters from staff recruitment to partner selection to field interactions). Case studies of good practice were collected through an organisational “gender award” – first prize going to two projects in Pakistan, which operate in particularly difficult (even life-threatening) situations. A wide variety of context-specific tools for promoting gender awareness have also been developed, of which Bangladesh provides one example (see box).

The Gender Tool – Bangladesh

Bangladeshi society is strongly split into female and males worlds, with roles and responsibilities being strongly gender defined. This situation can prevent families from sharing daily tasks in the most effective way, and is thus an obstacle to livelihood improvement. The gender awareness tool is applied in a community in three steps:

1. Men and women assess in separate groups which types of activities (cooking, child care, specific agricultural tasks, financial management, etc) are undertaken by men or women or both;
2. The groups share the results and discuss the differences in their perspectives;
3. Participants aim to jointly define one or a few new divisions of tasks (or sharing of them) that could bring advantages to the household or community.

This tool underlines that gaps in knowledge and know-how between men and women are often culturally determined and can be addressed in a positive manner.

In its practical working regulations for staff, IC is gender aware, aiming to facilitate equal opportunities for women and men through flexible working hours, options for part time work, transport between home and the office (in countries in which this is a factor influencing the ability of women to work outside the home), and similar provisions. There has also been an initiative at HO to recruit and train female Junior Professional Officers, in recognition of a gender imbalance amongst Swiss-based development professionals.

Seniority

One of IC's basic working principles is participation, and all staff members are expected to have a positive attitude to sharing and learning. Nevertheless there are internal hierarchies that can result in reticence amongst more junior staff to speak out. This is very country and team-specific, and is not necessarily most prevalent in countries with strongly hierarchical societies. Much depends on the example set by individual senior staff.

As anyone working with IT knows, there tend to be strong generational differences in aptitude and interest regarding IT opportunities. This is evident in the use of Memex, which (with some exceptions) is predominately used by younger, more junior staff. This can be a sensitive issue and one that is difficult to confront, and senior staff often feel reluctant to express this bias or seek support.

Specific belief systems

IC works in countries and with partners in which clear Christian (of varying denominations), Islamic (Sunni and Shiite), Hindu, Buddhist and other religious beliefs or ideologies are professed. Respect for different world views is a working principle of the organisation; staff members are not expected to impose their own religious viewpoints in professional situations. Likewise it is a selection criterion for partners that they are secular in their activities, even if they have particular religious affiliations. Perhaps the most obvious example showing respect for religious norms is in working in Islamic cultures, where taking care to inform and cultivate the support of religious leaders can be crucial in being able to function in the field. This has, for example, enabled us to operate successfully in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan (Intercooperation Pakistan, 2008). Respecting other viewpoints can introduce complexities, as may be illustrated by a discussion in a KM workshop in Madagascar. The question of verification was raised – how can one be sure that another person's knowledge is true? Participants accepted that each person's knowledge is based on the information available to her/him, combined with her/his own experience and beliefs. This may not constitute the "whole truth", but a greater richness in understanding can be gained by sharing different perceptions on a given issue, as long as this is done in a manner that does not deliberately seek to deceive (Carter, 2007).

Openness to and respect for a whole variety of belief systems is particularly important in development activities. For example, in Madagascar, there is widespread belief in the power of the ancestors to influence daily life, particularly through *fady* or taboos. Matters that are *fady* can be very specific to particular communities or groups. Similarly, in many countries (particularly Muslim), issues for guidance are often referred to a respected elder member of community. This type of implicit knowledge (eg. of what day or the week and which specific activities are *fady* for a particular community; patterns of community self-regulation) is essential for effective field activities - but is not necessarily shared with an outsider immediately.

Building on (often tacit) indigenous knowledge is also a fundamental concept in our field activities. In some cases this may take the form of documenting indigenous knowledge to ensure it is not lost – an example from Pakistan may be given (see text box).

Documentation of indigenous knowledge on medicinal plants

Recognising the extensive local use of medicinal and aromatic plants in the mountain areas of North West Pakistan, the Innovation for Poverty Reduction project made a comprehensive effort to collect local recipes. NGO partner staff toured many valleys, meeting elderly men and women and local healers, mostly illiterate, and noted what they said. Once the recipes had been documented, the draft was presented in a workshop attended by seventeen recognised local healers from Malakand Division. They validated and signed a joint approval that the recipes were correctly documented. The project then published them in a book in Urdu titled '*Adwiatee nabatat sa Ilaj*' (Healing with Medicinal Plants). In acknowledgement of the intellectual property rights of the contributors, the book also listed the names of all the individuals consulted, and their villages.

Field – head office interactions

Whilst much of the communication that takes place between field and headquarters is electronic (sometimes telephonic, and increasingly using Skype), the importance of face to face exchanges is well recognised. Thus it has long been organisational practice to hold an annual IC week, at which HO staff and key persons from the field meet for thematic and organisational discussions. Regional thematic meetings (attended by thematic specialists from HO as well as those based regionally) are also held according to demand. The most recent, in autumn 2008, was held in Ukraine amongst Eastern European project staff. Yet an important conduit for knowledge exchange between projects in different regions is still visits made by HO staff – as well as through international staff who have work experience in different countries. Various attempts are being made to broaden this – the most obvious and common being study tours by staff and partners between countries, although there are a growing number of personnel exchanges.

Working function

Whilst programme and support staff members have different functions, there is a broad sense of shared values. One working practice underpinning this is that when IC was first founded, members of support staff were offered opportunities to experience field realities. Although funding constraints have made this less common, the practice remains and is perhaps one of the factors that contributes to the sense of “family” described under organisational culture. Organising field visits for regionally or project-based support staff is not difficult and is therefore regularly conducted, but members of support staff from HO can still also request field exposures, usually entailing a country visit of some two weeks.

Language

There are three main working languages in IC: English, French and Spanish. As the first language of the majority of Swiss, German comes fourth. Almost all international staff members are able to operate professionally in at least two of these languages, and often all four. It remains a challenge, however, to bridge the language divides of francophone Africa and hispanophone Latin America, as shown in an ongoing knowledge sharing process on the topic of Local Economic Development (LED). The LED group includes staff members of projects in Ecuador, Peru, Mali, Madagascar, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, and is a good example of a Community of Practice (CoP), based around a common interest and motivation. Their collective sharing is being coordinated by one staff member (based in this case in HO), who is organising the collection of lessons learned from each region using case studies, the editing and translating a draft document in three languages, the incorporation of feedback from the group members, and the overall synthesis of all inputs into a final version. This kind of inter-linguistic KM process entails quite complex coordination and is very time-consuming. In this case it is financed by IC as an investment for the future – it being seen that there is clear potential for increasing the effectiveness of project implementation through the collective sharing and learning.

Organisational culture

IC staff members often describe the organisational culture as “friendly” and “like a family” (see personal statements in Intercooperation, 2007b). Six years ago, but probably equally valid today, Schmidt (2002) characterised IC’s culture as being “networked”, using the definition of Goffee and Jones (1996). A networked culture is defined as one with high sociability linked with medium solidarity – people often make friends, and employees sometimes act like family. These are excellent preconditions for knowledge sharing. “However, the dominating friendly atmosphere leads sometimes to difficulties in getting functions or departments to cooperate with each other....it may become hard for colleagues to agree on priorities” (Schmidt, 2002). Schmidt’s survey was of HO staff (where there are 38 full time posts), and thus should not be extrapolated to the whole organisation. Nevertheless, a more recent Appreciative Inquiry exercise, which did cover the whole organisation (and included outsider perceptions), also indicated strong sociability in the organisation – although not in a directly comparable way, as the same survey questions were not asked. Solidarity – in terms of what the organisation stands for and what direction it should take in the future – also came out quite strongly.

Finally, the Swiss roots of IC should not be ignored, as there are aspects of “Swissness” that influence our identity, despite our international make-up. One is an expectation of careful thought and deliberation before change is made (which can result in slowness). Another is an underlying belief in the principle of subsidiarity – that decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible (a view driving organisational decentralisation). In HO, in particular, an expectation of being able to participate in organisational decisions is also very strong.

Impacts and cross-partner learning

It is generally easier to describe KM initiatives and processes than to cite specific impacts. However, a number of initiatives that have achieved/are achieving tangible results can be mentioned.

Latin America

In Latin America, IC's delegation is working in 6 to 8 countries of Central and South America. Realising the high potential of knowledge sharing in somewhat similar contexts and in a common language, the delegation was able to convince SDC to fund a regional KM project, as service provider to about 50 members (SDC projects, national and local partners, local government associations, social organisations, other bilateral or international cooperation organisations, etc). ASOCAM addresses the full KM cycle, from evidence-based knowledge generation, collective identification of topics and lessons learned, disseminating good practice, applying and validating findings and also seeking to institutionalise them at various levels (policy dialogue). This cycle is fulfilled through three mechanisms: the first is an annual collective sharing and learning event (a one-week regional workshop with up to 40 participants); the second comprises time-limited inter-learning groups (CoPs) amongst a few projects, and the third is specific studies based on case analysis. The choice of topic is based on member demand. ASOCAM provides professional services and support for KM methodologies, editorial purposes and information management – the later through its website (<http://www.asocam.org>), which is structured in thematic portals to which the members' projects also contribute. The aim of ASOCAM is to promote broad knowledge sharing and learning amongst projects and local partners in rural development in the Andean region – it goes well beyond solely organisational (IC) KM. Whilst it is currently a member-based service, interest expressed by external clients has highlighted options for offering further KM services on a payment basis.

Madagascar

One particular project from Madagascar, Koloala Manompana, can be used to illustrate the importance of building multiple partnerships in knowledge sharing and learning. The project seeks to assure the sustainable management of the forests within two conservation areas through transferring management responsibilities to local communities, at the same time as investigating carbon trading options. In this, the project operates at local, national and international level. At local level, the project has developed partnerships with the local administrative authorities, the department of forests, and the people living near/in the forests (organised by hamlet/village). With facilitation by the local project team, the communities have shared their knowledge of forest use and management practices, and elaborated their vision for the future. This has in turn been integrated with available scientific and policy data. At the national level, the project is actively contributing to defining a strategy for a Readiness Plan (for 2012 post-Koyoto Treaty activities) under the lead of the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism. It is also sharing its experiences with other actors working towards REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation –

see <http://snipurl.com/4pq4w>). In this way the project is part of a knowledge network of national and international partners – the latter including the European Commission and the Centre for International Forest Research, CIFOR.

Pakistan

A specific process of evidence-based learning or “capitalisation of experiences” is one which used an existing methodology to draw out lessons learned by IC’s Pakistan projects (all SDC funded) in strengthening and establishing linkages with Business Development Service Providers (BDSPs). The process (based on a LEISA manual) included joint field visits, meetings with stakeholders, workshops and an exchange visit to Bangladesh, and is thoroughly documented on the LEISA website

(<http://documentation.leisa.info/intercooperation/introduction.htm>).

India

A wide variety of evidence-based learning processes have been conducted through IC (with SDC funding) in India, a notable case being CALPI (Capitalisation of Livestock Programme Experiences India),

<http://www.intercooperation.org.in/km/pdf/calpi/CALPI%20Fact%20sheet.pdf>. This project has been able to bring lessons of livestock experience to the policy level, for example supporting the government of the State of Chhattisgarh to develop a new and pro-poor livestock policy through a multi-stakeholder consultative process.

Water, Land and People

Another “capitalisation” exercise completed recently, and fully funded by SDC, focused on the theme of integrated water resource management, drawing together the experiences of projects and partners in three countries across three continents: India, Mali and Bolivia. A notable tool used in the process was that of story-telling, and in addition to the country-specific outputs, a CD and website was created (in English, French and Spanish) that synthesises findings (<http://www.waterlandpeople.net/en/index.htm>). Apart from value of knowledge exchange to all those who participated in the exercise, the material documented is intended for use by a variety of actors, including local people engaged in water management and national and policy-level actors.

Lessons learned

Intercooperation’s KM experiences to date suggest the following lessons:

Keep IT systems simple!

- IT systems can be important in promoting KM, but should not be seen as the primary vehicle for it to take place. Where IT systems are employed, it is best to keep them simple; the more complex and tailor-made they are, the more costly they become - not only in construction but also (very importantly) in maintenance.

- Some staff are likely to feel challenged by IT systems – broad training in their use is thus necessary, backed by regular refresher courses.
- The maintenance of an accurate database requires input from a coordinator (or coordinators) with allocated time for the purpose; relying solely on a system of decentralised responsibility is not enough.

KM processes are generally highly appreciated by clients

- Demonstrations of effective KM processes clearly help attract funding for more activities (this has been the case both with the main client, SDC, and others)
- Working with one main client that sets importance on long term commitment and learning has enhanced KM processes, in that there has been a mutual interest to draw out lessons learned and to share them with other SDC-funded initiatives.
- Whilst one of the main hurdles to KM perceived by staff is a lack of time, it can be possible to gain paid time from donors if this is planned from the start, and given budgetary allocation. Indeed, as projects such as ASOCAM show, it is possible (if not always easy) to gain funds purely to conduct KM processes.

KM processes must be planned systematically

- KM processes need specific competences – setting aside IT aspects, specific methodologies may need to be learned such as Appreciative Inquiry, story telling, peer assists, after action reviews, etc. The development of staff capacities in this respect requires the allocation of appropriate time and human resources.
- KM initiatives should be planned with clear outputs in mind – usually around a specific theme. The most commonly conceived output is a document or video, but the output might also be a specific field activity, etc.

A holistic approach is essential

- As mentioned early in the paper, the challenge to further KM processes within IC lies in fostering greater horizontal exchange, regional to regional. There is already considerable exchange (in electronic communication, visits of personnel, sharing of documents, etc), but often this is through the delegations rather than individuals working on specific themes.
- The need for strong multi-lingual capacities for inter-regional exchange remains a major challenge; staff members need to be supported and encouraged in language training, and such competences also taken into greater account in recruitment.
- KM competences and responsibilities need to be mainstreamed throughout the organisation. In a decision reflecting this, no single individual is allocated specific KM responsibilities under the re-organisation of HO staff that came into effect in early 2009. KM responsibilities are instead shared between thematic specialists.

KM can work in support of the poor and marginalised

Ultimately, Intercooperation's activities aim to improve the lives of the poor and marginalised, and any processes which improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our work contribute to this goal. More specifically, we recognise that an important aspect of poverty is powerlessness. In so far that "knowledge is power", validating the knowledge of the poor and marginalised, building their capacity to access other knowledge and influence, and linking their experiences to policy making fora is a very clear way in which appropriate KM can work on their behalf.

References

Carter, J. (2007) Rapport sur la gestion des connaissances – IC Madagascar (Groupe IC et équipe SAHA) 18 – 22 Novembre 2007. IC rapport interne.

Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* Intermediate Technology Publications, London UK.

Goffee, R. and Jones, G. (1996), What holds the modern company together? *Harvard Business Review*, November – December p.133-148.

Hugelshofer, M. (2006) *Knowledge Sharing in the Swiss Development Sector: Challenges and Achievements* Mémoire de Licence University of Geneva.

Intercooperation (2007a) *Knowledge Management Policy*. Internal document – available on request.

Intercooperation (2007b) *Annual Report 2006*

Intercooperation Pakistan (2008) *Redefining Farm Forestry: Farm Forestry Support Project Pakistan, 2008*

Nutley, S., Davies, H. and Walter, I. (2003) *Learning from Knowledge Management*, St Andrews, Scotland: University of St Andrews.

Quaggiotto, G. 2005. Elective affinities? Reflections on the enduring appeal of knowledge management for the development sector. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 1(3) 41-45 <http://www.km4dev.org/journal/index.php/km4dj/article/view/98/158>

Ramalingam, Ben (2005) *Implementing knowledge strategies: lessons from international development agencies*. Working paper 244, ODI: London

Ramalingam, Ben (2006) *Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations*. ODI: London

Schmidt, E. (2002) *Knowledge Management at Intercooperation* MBA Project Ashridge Management College.

Schneider, K. (2008) *Capitalising Experience on Business Development Service Provision Final Work Report*. Intercooperation Pakistan and NADEL, Zürich.

Senge, P. (1990) The Fifth Discipline The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization
Random House UK.

Acknowledgements

A number of people kindly read and commented on this document at various stages in its development. In particular, Eva Schmidt, Bertha Camacho, Sarah Byrne, Bruno Hermann, Felix von Sury and the journal editor Ivan Kulis are thanked for their constructive suggestions. Very special thanks and sincere apologies are due to Riff Fullan for helpfully providing comparative material about Helvetas. Unfortunately, this could not be included due to space restrictions.

Jane Carter has a doctorate in rural development forestry in Nepal, and has worked for IC for nearly 12 years – both based at field level (in India) and in head office. From early 2006 to end 2008, she held the title of Knowledge Coordinator at head office, combining KM responsibilities with thematic work on forest governance issues. From the beginning of 2009, she has the position of Joint Head of the Governance and Natural Resources Team. Jane Carter, Intercooperation, Berne, Switzerland. Email: jane.carter@intercooperation.ch

Pascale Aubert holds two Masters degrees, in Developing Country Studies and in Biodiversity Management. During 2008, she was responsible at IC HO for (amongst other matters) coordinating a collaborative knowledge management exercise in Local Economic Development. From the beginning of 2009, she has the post of Coordinator of Information Management and Communication. Pascale Aubert, Intercooperation, Berne, Switzerland. Email: pascale.aubert@intercooperation.ch

Arjumand Nizami has an MSc in Social Forestry from Pakistan and is currently studying for her PhD in Natural Resource Governance at Wageningen University, Netherlands. She joined IC Pakistan in 1998 and is now the joint head of the office there, with her Swiss counterpart. In addition to her thematic knowledge in forestry and related policy aspects, she has particular experience in "capitalisation" - facilitating the participatory analysis of project experiences, and documenting the lessons learned in a manner accessible to different audiences. Arjumand Nizami, Programme Coordinator, Intercooperation Delegation Office Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: arjumand.nizami@intercooperation.org.pk

Alain Cuvelier has an MSc in agronomy, and over 25 years of experience in development work in Africa and South-Asia. He has been with IC for over 17 years, based in Madagascar and Bangladesh. He currently heads the IC office in Bangladesh, where he is particularly engaged in human and institutional development and knowledge management. Alain Cuvelier, Delegate, Intercooperation Delegation Office, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: alain.cuvelier@intercooperation-bd.org

Julia Randimbisoa has a Bachelors degree in history, and trained in journalism. She has worked for IC for 13 years, specialising in local level capacity building and multi-stakeholder collaboration. She is currently Deputy Delegate of the IC office in Madagascar, with particular responsibility for KM. Julia Randimbisoa, Deputy Delegate, Intercooperation Delegation Office, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Email: j.randimbisoa@intercooperation-mg.org

Lorena Mancero has a Masters degree in local economic development (public policies for LED promotion, rural economy) and local governance (policy advocacy, empowerment practices), as well as being experienced in natural resources management. She leads ASOCAM, the Latin American Network for Knowledge Management. Lorena Mancero, Head of IC-Andes Knowledge Management, Quito, Ecuador. Email: lmancero@intercooperation.org.ec

This article has been published with minor changes in the [Knowledge Management for Development Journal](#), Volume 5 Issue 1 2009, on Collaborative Learning: The Role of Organisational Knowledge Management Strategies